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A NEGOTIATING TRAP

1. Hanoi is convinced that the US will eventually withdraw from Vietnam because it cannot win and the American public will not accept the price of staying there. Its goal, therefore, is to outlast the US, and it has pursued this goal with considerable skill. The Vietnamese leaders are in fact so fixed on this vision of how the war will end that they may be vulnerable to an American play which takes advantage of their fixation. More specifically, it may be possible for the US to engage them in talks from which they cannot easily withdraw and in which they can be outmaneuvered through exploitation of their own rigidity. In the process, it can at the least buy several months time in which to make progress in the South. If this analysis is wrong, that is, if the North Vietnamese are restrained only by the bombing from entering negotiations which would lead to a settlement acceptable to the US, such a strategy would also give them an opportunity to come to the table.

2. To carry out this strategy, the US must be willing:

- a. to forego bombardment of the North for a period of at least several months.
- b. to give no indication, public or private, that it has not stopped the bombardment unconditionally and permanently.

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- c. to convey the impression by in-direction that the pressures of public opinion are gradually forcing it to a recognition that it cannot win and must eventually withdraw.
- d. to keep its mouth shut--indefinitely--about its real intentions in talking to the North Vietnamese.
- e. to pursue the war in the South relentlessly.

3. Under such a scenario, the US would privately notify the North Vietnamese, [redacted] that it was halting the bombardment indefinitely, and that it would be ready to talk at a given place and date. It would then stop the bombardment and send credible representatives to the designated place. There would be no public announcement, but the fact that the US had stopped and was seeking talks would be allowed to leak out. Confronted with this, the Administration's posture would be one of embarrassment at being caught in a retreat. (It might for instance make noises about how the barrier can do the job and bombing is no longer necessary; this will convince no one.) Reconnaissance of North Vietnam would continue, bombing of Laos would continue, and the war in the South, up to the edge of the DMZ, would be pressed.

4. Hanoi is already expecting another pause in the bombing and would, therefore, not be surprised. While it would much want to believe that the US was beginning to give, it would be deeply suspicious that this was some sort of political trick. Both ideas would act to harden Hanoi's position. The North Vietnamese would not respond to the US invitation to talk--and might publicly reject it--but would rather commence a period of probing. They would seek to uncover any "hidden conditions" in the US position and to establish additional conditions of their own. These might include the halting of reconnaissance and of attacks in Laos, or some sign from the US that it

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was willing to talk on the basis of the Four Points or was willing to negotiate with the NLF.

5. On the ground, Hanoi would do all it could to intensify military pressure in the South, but would probably scale down its overt attacks across the DMZ (It would be sufficiently interested in the potential of the US offer not to jeopardize further progress by putting the US in an intolerable situation). Hanoi would also take full advantage of the cessation of bombardment to put its house in the North in order, to stockpile and fortify in the area north of the DMZ, and to reduce its vulnerability should bombardment be resumed. The longer the halt, the more effective these measures would be.

6. Assuming that Hanoi has not disrupted the US offer by continuing pressure across the DMZ, the US would at this point have bought a considerable lessening of domestic and international political pressure and an improved position on the DMZ. In return, it would have paid a considerable price. Hanoi would be reinforced in its conviction that it was on the right track. It would be free of the pressures and disruptions of bombing, although its capability to pursue the war in the South would not be substantially improved.

7. During this period, the game would be a difficult one for the US government. As the halt continued without visible results, the administration would come under severe attack from the political right, which would want attacks on the North resumed. While pressures from the left would be weaker, there would be increasing demands for more concessions the longer the North Vietnamese held out. Casualties on both sides in the South, except in the DMZ, would probably rise sharply. The administration would have to maintain a forthcoming attitude toward Hanoi, and perhaps in time give a little ground to Hanoi's additional conditions, without compromising its ability to continue the war in the South. It

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would have to be exceptionally patient and close-mouthed while waiting for the pressures it had generated to soften Hanoi's intransigence.

8. These pressures would be increasingly strong. The intensified fighting in the South would presumably result in a further weakening of the enemy positions there. At the same time, international pressure on Hanoi to enter talks would mount. The USSR, whose terms the US would have met, could be expected to advise Hanoi to do so, although the extent to which it would be willing to apply leverage would depend on whether it believed that the US, if its present play failed, planned a major escalation of the war. (Note the complication: the US must convey to Hanoi that it is beginning to fold its tents, but must convey to Moscow that it is seeking a last try at a reasonable settlement before embarking on a dangerous course). Finally, and most important, Hanoi would want to believe that the US was following the French path. (The lessening of domestic pressure achieved by stopping the bombardment would be partly screened by the more militant peace groups, who would be as vociferous as ever). Thus, after a most difficult period of two or three months, Hanoi would probably feel obliged to enter talks.

9. Hanoi would insist that such talks be private and exploratory, although the US would have to publicize the fact they were taking place. Its objective would be to probe the US position for confirmation that the US was willing to accept a settlement which would eventually lead to achievement of Hanoi's aims in the South. Its probable tactic would be to take an extremely hard line in the talks, insisting that they only deal with US-North Vietnamese issues, (such as reparations, perhaps) and that the US deal with the NLF on issues concerning the South. The North Vietnamese would recognize that, second only to the bombing, the status of the NLF is the issue on which the administration's position

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vis-a-vis its own public is weakest, and they would seek to exploit the contradiction between this attitude and the administration's need to sustain the GVN.

10. Faced with this intransigence, the US would seek to string out the talks for the longest possible time, and to delay exposing the basic hardness of its own position. It should be prepared to confuse the NLF issue, at least as far as the American public was concerned, but it should expect some increase in pressure from the political left for further concessions. (It should at the same time be prepared to respond in kind if any give began to appear in Hanoi's position).

11. The US objective at this point would be to entangle the North Vietnamese in discussions which did not go the way they expected them to go. When they discovered that the US had no intention of abandoning its goals in the South and had successfully retained domestic support for the war they would feel confused and betrayed; they would probably be subject to a kind of paralysis, not unlike their behavior on the battlefield when a set plan has been disrupted. They would recognize that over a period of several months the US had further weakened the Communist position in the South. They would seek to break off the talks in the belief that the blame could be thrown on US stubbornness and that the adverse trends both in the US and in the South could be reversed.

12. Here they would run into difficulties. The fact of talks over a period of several months, and the fact that the bombing had stopped, would in themselves have created a new situation. With the war confined to the South, with the threat of a wider war removed, and with an increasingly respectable GVN, international opinion would no longer find the US position unreasonable. The

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pressure on Hanoi not to upset a moderately satisfactory balance would be great. Hanoi would calculate that the same pressures would be at work on the US not to resume bombing, and indeed this would be true: after a pause of several months it would be most difficult for any US government to resume. Even if the US were restrained from bombardment, however, it would have bought time to continue in the South, and Hanoi's ability to reverse the trend of events there would be most doubtful. Hanoi would have few cards left to play. Thus it would find itself in a situation in which it could not withdraw from the talks except at great cost, but could continue them only under conditions in which it grew steadily weaker. If Hanoi could be brought to such a state, it would no longer matter whether a negotiated settlement ever ensued.

13. The scenario outlined above holds true only if US resolve remains firm and if the US and GVN maintain their momentum in the South. It has three major weaknesses. First, by taking the steps outlined the US would be unleashing forces which would act on it as well as on Hanoi and which it could not control. The US would be gambling that these forces would not gradually come to hamper its operations in the South. An atmosphere in which both sides were restrained from overt military activity would clearly favor the Communists. Second, cessation of bombardment, while it would not directly or decisively affect the war in the South, would strengthen the North Vietnamese government and encourage it to persist. Third, the scenario assumes that the cessation of bombardment and active pursuit of talks will be enough to retain adequate public support for the war. It assumes that a combination of talks and visible progress in the South will offset a continued high rate of casualties. This may not be the case, and the US could find itself talking to the North Vietnamese from a position of extreme weakness. The scenario at least offers a chance of reversing or retarding the present trend in this direction, and in the absence of any more attractive solution may be worth trying.

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